

**All That is Worth Remembering**

by

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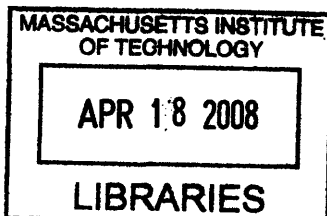
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## Introduction

In the December of my Senior year, my old piano teacher died. Old not in the sense of age, because he was really quite young (in general, but specifically to die), but in the sense that I took lessons from him when I was a kid and young adult (how I despise that term), and hadn't spoken with him, at least not at length, in years.

Standing at his wake—only the second I'd been to in my life and the first that was more than a small room of silent people and the acrid smell of lilies—I found myself, awkwardly, taking notes. The colors of the wall, the kids running around, the food, the music, the speeches—I knew I would write a poem about it—there was so much to communicate about the experience of finding Tim, learning from him, and then losing him. Too much irony and beauty, tragedy and honesty. Too much love and loss. So I took notes on a piece of paper with lyrics to “Hallelujah” on it, borrowing a pen from my high school best friend.

The paper sat next to my computer for a couple of weeks, and then it sat in a pile of papers on my desk for a few more. Then a pile of papers and magazines and readings on my floor, by my desk. Then a mass of rubble on the floor, in the corner of my room. Then covered over by clothing and other unfinished business. And though I literally buried the physical evidence, the words on the paper swarmed through my head, never coalescing into an image, a poem. Though my original thoughts were on the paper, the true words never came to me. Despite my notes, despite my unceasing emotion, I couldn't find a way to express what it all meant to me. I tried. Many times in thought, and four times on paper. Four distinct poems came out—all with repeated elements that signal to me what I find most extraordinary in the experience. Yet I was not able to sit back and say, “This is it. This is my poem for Tim. This does him justice, does me justice.”

I think, sometimes, the words exist in a puddle, but cannot be gathered together. And pressures such as a deadline of, say, a thesis, force us to make something of the muck. But when it comes down to it, even after writing my 4<sup>th</sup> poem on this same experience, the words just aren't there. Sometimes they just

don't come together. This doesn't mean that they won't ever, and it doesn't mean that what I've written is without value... it just means that I'm not ready to write the poem that I literally ache to get out of me.

The good news is that with each attempt I find something new. With my latest (the fourth attempt), a villanelle, I found that more than the color of the walls at the wake or the kids running around the mourners, I am struck by the sheer gravity of loss—what it means to unexpectedly lose someone you never thought about losing. What it means to have nothing but a memory of someone. Whether that's what I was ready to discover, or whether the strict form of the villanelle forced me to, I do not know. But I do know that, despite losing the richness of details, there is something very moving, at least to me, about the villanelle's surface-layer simplicity. Perhaps this is my signal that Tim's death meant something more symbolic to me than literal. I'm still not sure.

But I am sure that I would like to share this process with you... the process, for me, of figuring out the world and my place in it, via the process of recording my experiences through poetry. And so I present you with my poetry, but first, with my poems for Tim, as they represent to me a sort of growing up.

*Sonnet for Timothy Vernon*  
*(written the day after his wake)*

Really, time has passed although it feels as though it hasn't.  
Things have changed are changing and there's nothing I can do.  
It all seems constant, every time, but there's nothing here that lasts.  
Everyone is dying, don't deny it, for it's true.  
There's accidents and "accidents," pneumonia, age, and then.  
Hear from friends or papers, be shocked, until it sets.  
Funerals and shivas, wakes and services to attend.  
But can I ever really heal if the grieving never rests?  
And can I ever really grieve if I've no time for reflection?

But I'm not the star of this show—only one day will I be.

It seems that all I get for now is simple introspection.

And for now I'll deny that anyone changes, anyone but me.

A man has died, he watched me age, he taught me so much that I  
know.

He meant a lot, but is now one more wake, one more funeral to go.

My problem with this poem was that I felt a 14 yr. old wrote it, and her assignment was to write a sonnet using the word, "introspection" and the phrase, "for it's true." It all seemed too clichéd, and there was really nothing that made this a poem about Tim, aside from a vague reference to teaching, and a mention of pneumonia (how he died).

And so, a few days after writing the sonnet, I wrote the following poem:

Tim Vernon

By now they've cleaned your place, and have put it on the market.

They've left the basic furniture, and call it "Quite the Find."

Your piano's gone, leaving little dimples in the carpet.

And all that I remember exists now solely in my mind.

I think about how bald you were, and how you never cared.

Or how I learned to touch type as you taught Angela to play.

All the tricks and tips you showed me, all the preludes that we shared,

All the minuets and nocturnes—each magnificent in their own way.

And now they tell me that you've died, and I know they must be wrong.

Because I expect you to give lessons to my kids and all their friends,

And I expect them to play beautifully, but you can't teach them if you're  
gone.

And you're too young, and I'm too young, and this can't be how it ends.

I always meant to take more lessons, work on rhythm, learn some theory,

Meant to pick up Chopin's preludes, even though it's been so long.

But I don't want to take a lesson if you're not the one who hears me,  
And it hurts to think that no one now will ever hear your song.  
I know you didn't house the homeless or cure a bad disease.  
I know you left the Earth while there was still a lot to do.  
The thing is, you did so much and mean so much to me.  
And I'm sorry that future generations won't get to know you, too.  
If it's any consolation, you have truly changed my life.  
And I think of you when I sit down and play through something tough.  
You taught me how to play piano, to create beauty from my strife.  
And I know that somehow, to everyone, this, alone's, enough.

I felt that this poem had moved forward, but still, something didn't settle well with me. Perhaps it went far, said too much, explained too much. There is something in the loss of a person that we all understand—that you cannot (no matter how hard you try, no matter how eloquent you are) sum up a person's life, or a person's meaning to you, in a paragraph, a stanza, a poem. There is too much lost to context. There is too much, simply, lost. And my attempts to capture this in the poem, specifically the refrain, failed to me.

I left the topic. I wrote a list, several pages long, of my memories from the wake... the little details. And then I put away the list, and tried to put it all from my mind, operating under the philosophy of how we can only remember something on the tip of our tongues if we momentarily forget it. I spent the next few months writing other poems, doing other assignments, enjoying life, but still I felt haunted. Everywhere I went I saw Tim. That is, I saw men who looked like Tim. And sometimes I saw men who didn't even look that much like him, but still I saw them as if they were him. After one such encounter in April, I got out my list of wake-details, and I wrote the following poem:

Timothy Vernon

I saw you today, walking toward me  
with another man. Is that...  
what's his name? They said it a few months ago  
and it was new to me,  
news to me.  
Now forgotten, I suppose. So soon.  
Well you're walking toward me  
and I see your bald head, pastel shirt.  
We're in the building that has pianos  
so it makes sense to see you here.  
Aside from the fact, of course,  
that you've been gone since December.  
I've seen you a few times since then,  
mostly in middle aged or older men  
with bald heads and pastel shirts.  
But this is the first time you've looked back.  
Chills up my spine.

I like the way they ran your wake.  
It was only my second one ever  
and the first was an absolute nightmare.  
Yours was more of a commemoration;  
I think you would have liked it.  
Some of your students played piano.  
I didn't, and Angela didn't,  
but we did joke that the two girls on stage  
performing "Wild Horses" were us  
6 or 7 years ago.  
"Wild horses couldn't drag me away."

A girl I used to babysit for read a poem  
about the 7 minutes she wasted  
being late to her last lesson with you before you died.  
The 7 minutes she now wishes she had spent with you.  
7 minutes she will never again waste,  
or so she says.  
Anyway there was a lot of food  
(too much to fit on the tables)  
and not enough chairs.  
I'd guess three hundred people came;  
the room was literally stuffed.  
Your family came over from Berlin.  
A giant reunion,  
except that no one knew each other.

There was a guy with slicked back hair  
who I somehow found attractive.  
Angela knew I would, and knew she wouldn't,  
but I think she just never saw him smile.  
It's hard not laugh in these situations.  
Everyone so quiet  
and laughing so very inappropriate.  
Course we had to.  
Meanwhile there were kids running around,  
and there was some bad poetry read – lack of meter,  
forced rhyme—the usual.  
Some woman had lined one wall with tables  
And lined the tables with memorabilia.  
Pictures of you I'd never seen  
will never again see.  
You loved many, and you loved a lot.



It was all pretty tragic and heartbreaking  
until we remembered that we're not mourning your death,  
but celebrating your life.

It hits me very suddenly that these walls,  
white and yellow,  
have seen many wakes.  
And this linoleum floor has been watered by many tears.  
How many songs have been sung,  
And so we sing. Some in tune, some not.  
Some sing harmony. Friends of a musician.

Thank you for saving that poem,  
my poem.  
Considering the fact that I now study writing,  
it's unfortunate that I was unable  
to write you something better.  
But I guess I was younger then.  
Anyway, it meant a lot to my mom  
that you saved it. Don't get me wrong,  
I do appreciate the gesture,  
there's just a part of me that assumes  
you unknowingly saved it.  
That they found it behind a radiator  
when they cleaned out your house.  
The house I miss so much now.  
The drive to your house, even.  
The slate path to the door,  
the way your screen was slow to close.  
And I miss my fear of staining the white stripes  
on your blue and white striped chairs.

Stains from, I don't know, dirt and growing into my body  
and maybe just shame from not practicing nearly enough.  
I miss the painting behind your piano.  
Was it Cubist?  
Suppose I'll never get to see it again.  
I miss your bookshelves  
literally stuffed with books and CDs.  
And I wonder what happened to all of them—  
if your brother sits and plays them each night  
to retain that part of you.  
I wonder if they had to replace the carpet  
because the piano left such deep dimples.  
What did they do with your magnets?  
The one that reminded you to water your piano.  
What did they do with your computer?  
The one I learned to touch type on  
as Angela learned to sing.  
It seems that just as you,  
these things are gone.

I'm just a little angry.  
Frustrated and angry.  
The thing is, Tim, you just left.  
You didn't give me any warning.  
And it's not as if I could have done anything for you,  
and it's not as if we'd even talked in years.  
But you really should have said something.  
You were supposed to be thinking of me.  
And in a decade or two  
you were supposed to give my kids lessons.  
But you can't teach them to play piano if you've died,

can you?  
So come back, please. Just for an hour each week.  
Even 45 minutes.  
I just need you to teach them  
the way you taught me.  
And maybe you can even give me a couple more lessons,  
really smooth over Chopin's "Fantasie-Impromptu."  
You remember the spots I had trouble with;  
I never worked them out on my own.  
And maybe this time you'll tell me ahead of time  
if you're going to leave.  
I'll ask you for that painting,  
give you a hug,  
and then I promise I'll let you go on your way.

This felt better. Felt like I was able to share something of Tim with the world that I am saddened to think exists now without him... share the little details of him that I loved, the little details that I never even got to tell him that I noticed, never mind loved. But I felt that this poem conveyed more detail than emotion. So again, I put it away.

Nearly one month later, upon hearing of my situation, Bill Corbett (my wonderful thesis advisor) suggested that I try writing a poem about Tim in the form of a villanelle. I knew the form from Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," the only poem I have ever committed to memory. So as soon as I had a bit of free time, I tried:

And so I sit here, somewhat grieving.  
Remembering all the things you said,  
But you didn't tell me you were leaving.

And I find it's hard to find myself conceiving  
Of your teaching me one day, and the next being dead.

And so I sit here, somewhat grieving.

I see you maybe once a week, and actually find myself believing  
that you're still here, and not just in my head.

Tim, you didn't tell me you were leaving.

But you did, and instead of hawing hemming heaving  
I sat here thinking, remembering smiles, avoiding dread  
And I still sit here, somewhat grieving.

I thought you'd give my kids lessons, help them in achieving.  
I thought we'd talk after their lessons, but instead  
You left, and didn't tell me you were leaving.

If not the lessons, I simply find myself needing  
One last look at the carpet, see dimples where the piano pressed in.  
But I won't get it, and so I sit here, somewhat grieving—  
You didn't tell me you were leaving.

As I said at the start of this introduction, it's not there yet. But it's getting there. The villanelle forces me to focus on two thoughts. The thoughts I chose were that I am still grieving somewhat, and that Tim died unexpectedly. It leaves private all of the details I love and will cherish until I forget to cherish. And somehow I like that. Like driving by a graveyard, knowing that I cannot possibly know the life stories of all these people, or really any of them—that there are things too private, and too specific—I know that Tim's memory is mine. I can try to communicate it through a poem, but at some point that's all I have, and all I can do. So I write that poem, give it life, and then I let it take it off.

## Ansel Adams

I.

Ansel Adams died when I was 14 days old

I say to the girl next to me.

Our mutual friend smirks, as if I have said something dirty

or something profound. “Oh.

your birthday’s in April? What day?”

April 8<sup>th</sup>. “1984?”

She looks at me. I nod.

April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1984 is her birthdate, too. Special day—palindrome.

She hugs me, this friend of my friend, and her breasts squash

into mine through her dark velvet shirt.

Ansel Adams crafted his photographs by posing everything—

people, flowers, and mountains.

If there was a car to the side of a river,

he walked until a tree blocked it

and only then did he *snap*.

Weird to think about, but his photographs don’t exactly represent reality.

Never says it on the back of a postcard,

but he had a thing for clouds,

and in the black of his darkroom

he made his chemicals evoke the beauty

that the human eye fails, sometimes, to see

and the natural world fails, sometimes, to produce.

Putting in more of this chemical, less of that one  
until the graveyard was just the right shade of grey.  
The skies in his photographs are darker  
than they were when his shutter snapped.

I think that Ansel Adams got it; I think  
he “understood.” Had moments.  
Most people don’t know it—  
he was also a musician  
played piano.  
Once wrote that a negative is a composer’s score  
and each photograph is a performance.  
No two alike. Ever.  
I think about Ansel Adams in the woods,  
for days at a time sometimes,  
waiting for a deer to turn 90 degrees to the right so, in black  
and white, it doesn’t look like a far-off tree stump.  
I wonder if he got frustrated waiting  
or what he thought about, or if he did drugs.  
No one ever mentions if Ansel Adams had a mistress.  
No one mentions if Ansel Adams slept  
with the Indian women in his photographs.  
And I wonder if my museum guide is a virgin  
or if he speaks any other languages.  
Or if he always wanted to be a tour guide  
or if he wants to be one now.  
He could be making all of this stuff up—  
we might never know.

By the time we’re through the exhibit it’s dark out  
and my friends leave quickly.

I walk alone to the American wing to visit this one  
painting that I've loved since the first.  
The steps down to it are familiar—  
turn the corner, on the left, right there.  
There are ocean waves, turbulent, but somehow calm.  
This time I really look at it—  
no rush,  
though the place closes in 10 minutes. Can't get it  
out of my mind now.  
The brush strokes are so long, deliberate,  
as if Homer didn't care if he messed up.  
As if he rushed to paint  
the storm before it passed.  
Some places the paint is thick—  
looks like you could break a piece off  
put it in your pocket for later.  
Some places the paint is thin,  
scratched right down to the white canvas.  
Did Homer just not care?  
There's a splotch of red  
where there clearly should not be a splotch of red.  
Why didn't he paint over it?  
Why didn't he.  
I love it. I love *him* for it.  
I don't know what he looks like, or who he was—  
this is the first time I've even looked at his name,  
but I love him for it. Truly do.  
Love that the painting is so rough  
but still so capturing. I don't care why  
the sole man in it is picking up a piece of driftwood. I don't care  
to think about how strong a man must be

to lift something that big and that wet.  
I don't care. It just captures everything.  
And in the dim lights  
of the marble hall, that is enough for me.

In the gift shop I see hair sticks  
like the one my parents brought me back from Murano.  
They cost \$40,  
and I hope that my parents didn't spend that much on me.  
I love my gift, and I'm wearing it now,  
but I hope my parents got a deal for it.  
I buy a purse for myself—small, silk-lined.  
It has a metal clasp on top  
and I wonder how long it will take for the clasp to break.  
It's the second present I bought myself  
ever. And a pen for my mother.

## II.

On the bus ride home, packed in, a man sneaks on  
while the driver isn't looking  
through the rear door, where I'm standing.  
"Please excuse the alcohol on my breath.  
I don't mean no disrespect. I just had a good day  
today."  
Want to ask him what made it so good.  
Want to tell him he doesn't need to apologize.  
Wonder if the man next to me is practicing  
frotteurism with the man in front of him.  
Wonder if the man in front knows  
what frotteurism is, and if he knows the word



*frotteurism.*

I look at the window, cold glass against my side.  
It's been scratched  
and rubbed by strangers' backs for years  
but it still can't seem to fully block  
the view of the Charles.  
Silky black water. Oily, sliding  
underneath the bridge under our bus.  
I see a reflection of myself in the glass.  
Is this how I look? I forget  
sometimes. Pretend to look at the buildings far off  
but really I'm analyzing my face.  
My nose.  
Last night Mike told me it was big.  
My big Jew nose.  
And my lips.  
I think of how long it's been since they've touched  
other lips  
or any other body part, for that matter.  
I purse them a little  
and get off at my stop.

The moon is just a sliver.  
Like someone took a melon-ball scooper  
broke the skin  
then stopped.  
Just enough to see a curve of shimmering white.  
The clouds cover it, fast.  
With no one to hear me, I sing a Billie Holiday song.  
The same verse again and again  
because it's the only verse I know

and because it makes me feel nice.

A minute later the sky is completely coated with clouds.

So dark out.

The silver sliver of a moon is barely visible.

I have to squint to see it

and even then I have to think about where it was

before the clouds shaded over it

just to find it.

### **Sundays at Aunt Libby's**

Always Sunday, because Saturday was for religion  
and privacy.

Always family, but I don't remember them now.

Was it Uncle Lippy who was in the war? I have his medals.

Did I ever meet him?

Was he alive while I was?

Was it            I can't seem to remember his name, even  
or Aunt Libby much  
at all.

I remember how she breathed  
heavy

through her nose while she ate the deli sandwiches we made in her dining room.

I remember hating the sound

focusing on it

living in that inch of space between

flaring nostrils and grooved rye bread.

Afterwards we sat in the living room

so restless

I bounced up and down on the ornate chair that, for some reason

I still believe is there

even though Aunt Libby is long gone

and probably the tenants after her

are gone, too.

She moved to Florida like all old Jewish women.

An apartment on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor  
or was it 8<sup>th</sup>, my favorite number?

She lived in an apartment  
that I dreamed about for years after she died—  
dreamed about crawling under her dishwasher,  
finding a secret apartment behind it—  
fitting in that inch of space  
somehow.

On the walking paths around her apartment building

there were green lizards. Geckos?

I don't think I even knew then

because it didn't matter then

doesn't matter now.

I think I remember the elevator of her apartment building.

I think it was shiny, and silver, and new

with a digital screen over the doors

instead of one that looks like the top half of clock

like I imagine must have been in her old apartment building.

When Aunt Libby died we flew down there and I cried.

My mom did, too.

Was my dad there?

I'm not sure why I cried so much, but I remember

the apartment was warm.

Aunt Libby's space smelled like an old person, but still sweet.

And I think of how she breathed

as she ate in that apartment, too...

how I stood on her balcony  
and she told me about manatees  
how she was knitting a cardigan  
before she died  
how it's still in my closet, even though I don't fit into it now  
even though I never did.  
And it's white, and it's soft, and very small.  
I don't know who she was making it for  
or if that person is still expecting it  
or if I'll ever get to wear it  
or if I'll remember how Aunt Libby smelled  
once I do.

The other things she gave me are lost now—in my house  
but lost, even still.  
The polished marble sphinx  
one of a pair, with a broken-off front paw.  
The carved wooden man she must have bargained for in Israel,  
or asked her husband to bargain for,  
or maybe it was a gift  
from him to her.  
I can't remember the other things now  
but they must tell the story of her life.  
Lost in my house—given away, trashed, crushed  
beneath a hundred other life stories.

Every Sunday, before we left, she walked me over to her display case—  
glass windows, dark wood.  
Asked what I wanted, knew it was always something.  
Always took something.  
My parents knew what was going on,

standing by the door.

Were they pretending not to know for Aunt Libby? They told me  
not to take things from her

but she gave them to me.

I think my parents must have realized what she was doing

and I hope that, somewhere inside of me, I knew it, too

and appreciated each

and every gift, each

and every time.

But the pieces are all around my house now—

my parents' house—

every last one, maybe.

## **A Fantasy for the Dead**

That the world is a beautiful enough place  
to everyone  
that no one jumps  
out of his window  
or feels he has to.  
That he had told us,  
so we could have helped him.  
That we actually would have helped him  
if he had told us.  
That people try their best  
to make something from his death  
to live a little more, maybe.  
That his parents say, "I love you"  
every time they talk.  
That there is a heaven for him,  
that he's there,  
and he's finally happy  
and not alone, or confused, or sad.  
That every death has meaning,  
that no life is wasted,  
or forgotten, or misused.  
That my friend did not die in vain.  
That he knows, wherever he is now,  
that people love him

and miss him and don't understand,  
and can't grasp,  
and are just sitting and staring,  
and are having trouble breathing.  
Because he was a part of our lives, and now he's gone,  
and that's a hard thing  
to hear over the phone.  
It's a hard thing to accept  
and visualize.  
And it doesn't seem real.



### **Thank you, Sister**

I hear your words when I least expect it  
when I'm walking home from a meeting  
when I'm in the shower  
falling asleep.  
I can barely conjure up your image,  
but your voice plays like a recording  
acts like an oncogene going wild—unstoppable.  
You don't know you're doing it still.  
You didn't know that you were doing it then.  
I'm no psychic, of course, but I know  
those simple words  
will stick in my mind  
until I can remember nothing else of my past.

Would you have said the same thing to me?  
Would you have called me that  
even though my skin is the color of bandaids?

It's not like I even offered you my seat.  
You weren't old or pregnant,  
and I was cold.  
Just wanted to exhale onto the window  
and watch my breath freeze up against it.  
I wish I had offered you my seat.

I wish the Chocolate City guys would invite me to their parties.  
And I wish I were as elegant as the women in the party pictures.

You taught me a lesson in humility.  
You took one second to express your gratitude  
for that kindless, almost mindless act,  
and in doing so indented in my memory those three words.  
You have no idea you said them, but they are a part of me now.  
They are a part of my walk, and the way I smile  
The way I brush my hair and fold my laundry.  
They are all mine now.

## **Gunther Schuller**

Gunther Schuller is like a four year old who opens a gift  
at his surprise birthday party  
and says that it's not what he thought it would be  
in a tone that suggests  
the giver should be slightly to moderately ashamed.

He's wearing a cotton jacket the color of muted egg yolks  
and a tie that stands out against his white shirt  
and fragile hair.

Gunther Schuller is 80 today  
and telling everyone what to do.  
He's the only one wearing a  
microphone, speaks as we're about  
to hit the downbeat.  
Musicians hate that—he should know better.

But as he rants  
tells us how badly we played his piece,  
I watch his mouth move  
and hear only *Lament For M.*  
The tenor sax is crying.  
Vulnerable.  
Through these notes he aches for his wife—

the music that poured from his fingertips  
after months of blank sheet music  
confronted him at the piano.

This is his heart's music,  
not his mind's  
nor hands'.

And listening to it,  
hearing it in the nothingness of air  
all I want to do is  
get outside,  
maybe go for a walk,  
grab a Coke.

[*untitled*]

Arm in arm, they walked the town  
The falling leaves a swishing sound  
A hundred faces all around the crowd—ignited.

The street lamps kept the city light,  
Bathed in glistening, pearly whites,  
And then a man came into sight—a hunch.

He heard her say, “That man reminds me much  
of Chris—the resemblance is so strong—such  
that I won’t believe it until I touch his lips.”

His arms in hers, he heard all this,  
And thought about each movie’s kiss.  
How the actor resembled Chris—she said.

And perhaps it was all in his head,  
Perhaps her statements he over-read,  
But every man reminded her of Chris.  
And slowly, slowly, very slowly—his arm in hers—he realized this.

## **Isfahan**

Isfahan, with eyes of brown, and hair the darkest black.

Isfahan—my lover's, gone, and never coming back.

Isfahan, I'd carry on, and shed these thousand tears,

If Isfahan, you would return, so we could live our years.

Isfahan, I'll speak on and on, until my mouth runs dry,

Isfahan, dear Isfahan, for you alone, I cry.

Isfahan—my jack, my john—my everything, my all.

Isfahan, my missing one, I'm a fool against a wall.

## **White Wall**

I heard her sing to him through the white wall  
over the phone, across the country.  
I wondered if he sang along.

I heard her sing to him through two wooden doors  
into the receiver, through coil and coil.  
But couldn't quite make out her song.

I heard her sing to him in the sixteen separating feet  
gentle but sure, and quiet but sweet.

I heard her sing to him as she opened her door  
a day early, with a few plastic souvenirs.  
The plane ride must have been long.

I heard her sing to him as she tore up his words,  
talking on the phone to friends while she ripped.  
And I wonder where it went wrong.

**For the summer of 2004**

*for Alja, who had faith that I would be able to overcome the world and myself*

I remember reading Paulo Coelho  
on the train from New York City, going North.  
I remember the red plastic seats, cheap, squeaking.  
Too small for two people, really.  
The young business guy in the purple button-down shirt,  
on his phone the whole time  
beaming.  
Wondering    did he notice me?  
The drive home, still a commute, seeking silence.  
Up until midnight only, but those few hours  
all mine, were quite calming.

I remember the plane ride over—  
pilot announcing aurora borealis to the left.  
No one seemed to notice, but  
I did.  
Watched it closely, carefully for hours.  
The green dancing.  
Cried because it was beautiful  
                 and because maybe, just maybe                    a cliché.  
Should have saved my tears for when they took my baggage            to Tahiti.

Gabrje, Slovenia – how funny



it was to you when I tried to pronounce your town's name  
that first time.

How I worried that Americans are stupid     ignorant.

The way the mountains rolled outside your house

S l o w l y     effortlessly

as if there were nothing beyond them.

I remember packing the car, two of us in front, your friends in back.

"Only English from now on," you said to them.

And it lasted

for 5 minutes

at most.

Weird to live in a world, drive in a world, where the signs don't make sense.

Didn't matter much, though     we'd be at the beach in 3 hours

Or, as it turned out, 6 hours—

We needed the *perfect* beach, private beach, illegal beach.

I remember Krk. The island with three letters and an endless coastline.

I remember eating brie as the sun set, painting colors in the water

that would have made Monet     up and move.

I remember sleeping on rocks     the feeling of creatures walking my face  
ache of stones pressing my sides.

Waking again and again     again and again

and again

watching the moon rise, peak, set, and hide

all without my glasses

but somehow crystal

clear.

I remember the drive back

somehow less magical        more familiar  
but I liked it—this home of my mine, if only one night.  
The feeling of Croatian candies in my bag—thought I would keep them  
for many summers.  
Didn't know I would eat them a year later  
in class  
just to stay awake.

I remember saying goodbye at the foot of the train.  
The hug didn't seem long enough  
      but do they ever?  
The train ride so long  
How I asked, in German, if the train was running late  
Only to find out that the plane was on time  
and that neither of us spoke the language.

I remember 3 weeks in the mountains of Sayda  
as if they were 3 minutes.  
3 people in my room, the only single there.  
Walking through the woods at night,  
Walking in on friends sharing their love,  
Walking walking, never wanting to slow.  
Writing in my journal because I thought no one else would "get me."  
Bread for noontime breakfast, cheese for a sunset lunch.  
Dinner, cold, at midnight.

I remember saying goodbye.  
And I remember        coming home.  
Falling back into the groove with my friends from high school  
      like a record on repeat, but a good one  
                              like one you keep even once your player's broken.

Making the same salad every Sunday for the same friends.

Making t-shirts.

The night we had a cake that was decorated “Festive?” “Very festive.”

Finished it all. Every last bite. Picture to prove it.

The night we talked until the sun set until we couldn’t see each other

couldn’t see our own bodies

so dark.

Our fear of being alone, the lack of experience we all hate in ourselves.

The comfort of sharing it

spilling it out all over the porch the house the neighborhood

Telling someone. Just telling someone.

Promised not to forget it, and I know

we never will.

but

still

I’m scared.

## **Home For Thanksgiving**

Friday morning.

The plan was to wake up at 9,  
go through the usual routine,  
and be out the door by 10  
for my interview.

Only I wake up to Howard Stern  
and don't feel like peeling off the covers  
because my room is over the garage  
has three windows  
and all the heaters are blocked  
by furniture from my childhood.  
So I actually wake up to my father,  
upset, telling me that he can't sleep  
with my alarm going.  
It's been going for half an hour.

Two minutes later my body reacts  
and I rise to skulk the thirteen feet  
to my blaring radio that is, like everything else of mine in this house, breaking.  
It no longer plays CDs  
and the volume dial  
somehow reversed. Technology.  
I'm relieved to see that it's only 9:23.

Brush teeth, put in eye drops,  
walk downstairs.  
I dial someone's number—corporate recruitment  
to confirm my interview.  
Not that I'm supposed to,  
I just can't remember if we said noon or 2.  
Ring—I clear my throat.  
Ring—I dance around a little,  
wake the body up.  
Message machine.  
Why isn't this woman answering?  
I give her the benefit of the doubt—  
she's probably in the bathroom,  
I'll call again soon.

I decide to go back to my room  
to pick out what I'm going wear.  
I should have done this last night,  
and last night I knew I would feel this way.  
But in my living room, I pause,  
and walk over to the couch  
to sit for a minute—it looks  
inviting, and I'm finally starting to warm.  
I sit for a few seconds and get up,  
the pictures on our mantle  
ask to be looked at.  
I start at the far right.  
Three people, woman in the middle.  
All dolled up. Black and white photo.  
Not black and white because  
it looks classic—black and white

because that's all there was.  
I know my mother's written on the back of the photograph  
who these people are.  
When the pictures become mine,  
will I update it? As grandparents  
become great-grandparents, and great-grandparents  
even greater even grander?

There are many pictures.  
Only three in color.  
The rest are too old,  
of people I don't know.  
Where are these people now?  
What graveyard are they buried in?  
Who visits them?  
How many rocks are on their gravestones,  
and how many have fallen off over the years?  
It's been a while since I've put a rock on a gravestone.  
I don't know where my grandparents  
are buried.  
I leave their pictures for last.  
First my mother's mother  
then my mother's father  
then my father's father.  
Three people who are part of me—  
three quarters of me,  
and this is all I remember about them,  
how they look in these pictures.  
I apologize to them,  
begin to cry.  
Are my parents asleep upstairs?

Or do they know that I'm crying below them?  
They never mention their parents.  
I don't understand.  
I talk about them, my parents, constantly.  
How it must hurt to remember what you've lost when it was so important.

I don't tend to think of my parents  
as anything but my parents.  
Not children of someone else, or exs.  
I can't imagine what they went through when they lost their parents.  
I know I will be able to one day  
and the thought  
makes me cry more  
makes me crazy.  
I think of the hurtful things I've said to them  
without realizing it,  
without meaning it.  
Last night my mother started telling me  
about the plants in the kitchen.  
I was checking my email,  
and distracted,  
told her that I didn't understand  
why she was telling me—  
didn't understand  
the relevance to my life.  
But the relevance  
is her love for plants,  
and I turned down a chance to know my mother better.  
To know one half of myself better.  
Will she ever give me  
that chance again?

I dry my eyes  
and blow my nose  
into the same tissue,  
get up to throw it out,  
and see that it's 8:35.  
With a mix of resignation,  
and irony,  
I know it's correct.  
Daylight saving's time—  
no one reset the clock in my bedroom.  
My poor father—  
I woke him up two hours early.  
He's not a deep sleeper like I am.



**Zach Morris**

It's the little things about death that strike me.  
Not the funerals, or the empty chairs in class.  
Not the services, memorials, trees planted in memory of.  
But the alarm clocks—who will turn them off?  
And the dishes—who will wash them?  
How will the email get checked? How will the phone calls get returned?  
If the person is old, will his walker be sold in a tag sale?  
Will his teeth be found, wrapped in velvet, hidden in a box by his bed?

A girl knocks on the door.  
She's visiting Neil, an asshole  
junior who thinks he owns the dorm,  
was with Zach the night he died  
and has seemed to move on incredibly fast.  
She says she's on Neil's guest list,  
only,  
so is Zach.  
Who will take him off now that he won't come for visits?

[*untitled*]

It is true that my body is right here, right now.  
But when it comes down to it  
pieces of my mind still reside elsewhere.  
There's a chunk of mind in 1993  
sitting next to my glacier of a typewriter  
and its white-out cartridge,  
reminding me of the old black keys—  
press hard and hear the click clunk.  
Here, from my computer, I write an email to it  
wishing it well, and telling it  
I remember  
the Pleasantville Public Library (with its carts of books  
bound in ugly orange canvas)  
pointing toward Encarta 95  
and www.

My mind calls to me  
from the first cell phone  
my mother owned.  
It's a big grey boxy monster  
takes up most of her purse,  
which was, unfortunately, heavy enough in the first place.  
And my mind tells me that through the power  
of this big grey boxy monster

I can now reach it  
whenever, wherever I want.  
I ask it to pick up some more Fruit on the Bottom  
because I forgot to put it on the shopping list.

My mind is sliding down a red slide  
in Tarrytown, New York,  
getting shocked by the metal  
pieces that glom it together  
every 4 feet.

It's telling me to slide down the slide,  
the big red plastic slide,  
and then climb the wooden steps  
to slide down again.

I know that my mind doesn't want to hear it,  
but I say I'm just not sure I want to  
go for a slide right now.

I tell it that, sure, in 1989 the slide looks like fun,  
but from way up here it looks,  
almost, small.

**Arizona, January 2004**

In an ordinary cabin, on top of a mountain overlooking Flagstaff,  
Lowell Observatory froze in the winter.  
Our dinner guest, Bill Putnam, handed out copies of his book.

It was sweet, to give strangers a gift,  
but ultimately quite pathetic.  
A man who had written a book  
that no one bought.  
Not because it was bad.  
but because no one cared about it—  
*knew* to care about it.

And in that cabin, new book  
in hand—shrink wrap still on,  
we asked for his signature.  
It was simply  
an obligation.

Over lemon chicken and long-grain rice (which I cooked with Julie)  
I thought about his house—  
cold, somewhere.  
And in the basement, stacks of boxes,  
stacked taller than anyone who lives there—  
shrink wrapped books inside, dusty.

I wondered how long Bill Putnam had waited  
to get these books out of the house,  
and if the lemon chicken tasted any more sour  
because he knew we would never read them.  
That they would get just as dusty as the 96 other copies—  
only dusty in Florida and New York, Washington and North Dakota.

Is this accomplishment?  
Does Bill Putnam look at his framed book cover on the wall,  
and smile?  
Rather, he never framed a book cover  
because he wanted all 100 copies to be in pristine condition—ready.  
I imagine the tag sales where his book goes unnoticed.  
Sellers marking the book at \$1, then 50 cents, then simply free.  
I imagine the donation to the library—awkward and unwanted.  
And I wonder what Bill Putnam's wife said to him on the way home from dinner,  
And if she's even read the book, herself.

## **Clever**

“I no longer know how to solve differential equations  
and I’m not sure that I ever knew much Chemistry  
but if there’s one thing I know  
it’s people.”  
What I didn’t say  
at the time  
was that to know someone—truly know another  
is not like being a mathematician or a chemist.  
It is ache.  
Ache all over, in places you’ve never before registered ache.

Her mouth moves, brain sending signals  
muscles expand and contract, flex and flex.  
Her body forces out music  
meaning something to her.  
The waves roll through the air  
like waves roll through the oceans  
only very small and very fast.  
These waves hit my ear  
Swirl through the eddies, get sucked down the tubes.  
Muscles expand and contract, flex and flex.  
I hear music that means something to me.

And in the seconds this all takes

she has said one thing  
and I have heard another.  
Not because of malfunction.  
Not because we see the color *green* differently,  
or have different definitions of *love*.  
It is because one does not always say what ones means  
But some hear both versions at the same time.

And it aches  
nowhere in particular  
to register this.  
But still, it aches.  
So I question—sparks in my brain that no one else registers.  
So I wonder  
if the way my face tenses means more to her  
than I want it to.  
If by understanding the insides of others  
I allow myself to be understood.

**Brian**

Seeing him tonight  
being near him  
touching him  
for that four second hug  
was too much  
too much  
more than I could handle  
I swear it.

Made me wonder  
for the first time  
what it would be like if he had succeeded.  
Made me wish it.  
Wish it so I didn't have to feel this  
this longing.  
Wanting to take him away  
from this place this shit.  
Take him someplace quiet  
where he can cry  
green eyes unburdened  
by square glasses.  
Close his eyes.  
As I kiss him he smiles.



### **What then?**

When I tell the man at Picante  
that I want no beans in my enchiladas,  
I have to consider the option  
that he thinks I'm avoiding indigestion,  
when in reality I don't like the texture  
or lately, the taste.

Not that I care, particularly,  
what this man thinks,  
but still.

Meanwhile the two guys behind me aren't talking business,  
the logical conclusion being they screw.

And it's entirely possible that one, if not both,  
is wondering if I'm wondering.

And maybe the girl in the green fleece hat  
thinks her thighs are too thick,  
and the girl in the pink shoes  
is having a bad hair day.

When the truth is no one is looking.

No one cares  
about anyone other than himself  
and how he appears to others.

In some way, I am consoled.

People don't even notice

what I hate of myself.

But if they don't see

what I love,

what then?

### **On the beach, Spotted**

Tucked under a rock, but flapping in the wind  
is the bottom right corner  
of a photograph—  
was ripped into sixths, at least.  
A man's legs, or the bottom four fifths of them,  
bare legged in bright white socks  
and camel colored working boots  
that match his shorts.  
He's outdoors and in decent to good shape.

I find this artifact along the "beach"—  
the dirty water outside my dorm.  
I'm surprised to find the picture piece  
and surprised to find that I've never walked this beach before.  
There are some shells, but mostly rocks.  
A beach, in effect.

Like the beach I walked with Ammar  
almost three quarters of a year ago  
to the day.  
What a stranger he was to me.  
What a stranger he remains.  
I think of the purple shells on the beach  
of Thompson Island  
and how they crunched and were silenced

under the weight of our bodies.  
Purple carcasses littering the ground.  
I knew that we saw a different purple,  
but I didn't say anything.

Now, nearly eight months later  
on a new beach, and without Ammar,  
I crush my way along.  
And it seems to me that an entire lifetime  
has been broken into pieces  
and eroded into smoother pieces  
all right here.  
A lot of plastic bottles, all missing their labels  
but some still a third or fourth full.  
In the water I see a shiny silver pipe  
and imagine someone being bludgeoned with it.  
Then find myself ashamed at the harshness  
of the word "bludgeoned"  
that is filling my mind.  
Now a leaf floats over the pipe's image  
and I wonder how many waves  
the leaf has glided along.  
A water bottle floats behind it.  
I am thirsty,  
surrounded by the Charles.  
A black bag is blown up by the wind  
or maybe sand  
or something more permanent  
yet eroding.  
I care not to touch it  
like most other things here.

Except for the picture piece  
and a small slab of green glass  
that I rub between my thumb and pointer finger.

By the time I get the photo back to my room  
to really look at it,  
yellow dots have appeared all over.  
Yellow the color of smiley faces  
and old fashioned kitchen phones  
with 25 foot cords that twist into deforming knots.  
There are raised bumps over the man's legs  
and when I scratch at them they come off  
revealing even more yellow  
stealing even more picture.  
It seems that the longer I look at it  
the more yellow spots appear  
until the tiny bit of someone's life is littered with them.

## **When You Last Saw Me**

When you last saw me  
my hair brushed the bottom of my back  
right in the space where you loved to put your hand at  
as we walked down crowded streets—  
guiding me  
through the sickos and the cheats.  
That spot is still the same—still soft, indented.  
(Though the rest of me feels somewhat reinvented.)

Two years later I saw that a friend had posted online  
some recent pictures with you in them.  
Against a better judgment of mine  
I looked, and you were smiling  
At me. Unknowing that I would ever notice.  
Unknowing how defiling  
it felt to see your face.

I know that after all of this, all I want from you is the validation.  
It need not, and should not be a full explanation,  
just the simple words that I meant something to you.  
I want to hear them, though it might feel wrong,  
from the same mouth I ached to kiss for so long.  
The same mouth that called me horrible things.

I tell myself that I'm past it. That I'm in M.A.  
and you're in Texas. And that that's far away.  
But I still remember your fingers on my mouth.  
I want to douse your old room in gasoline and burn it down.

And if you only saw me now  
I feel you might insist on having me.  
Devouring me and ruining me  
two times a day, three times a night.  
My hair is thicker, stronger now  
although it's not much longer now,  
but I think that, somehow, anyhow,  
you'd love to feel it twist your fists.  
And yet, the very thought of this  
is what I worked so hard to just escape  
To think of you not at night, not day.  
But it seems you've come here anyway.

### **To endure**

She's just looking for someone.  
Anyone,  
a stranger will do, really  
might be better, actually,  
to tell her that it will all be okay.  
For her.  
It will all be okay for her.

So she watches movies to escape herself  
to lose herself,  
and wonders how people lost themselves  
before movies.  
The radio?  
And wonders why we feel the need  
to lose ourselves,  
and when we lose ourselves,  
where our "selves" go.

And she just wants to be loved.  
To be okay, and noticed,  
but really, to be loved.  
What she wants is a child  
so there will be someone to hug her,  
touch her love her make her feel okay.



Feel needed.  
Wants the child to crawl on her  
and kiss her and call her sweet names.

So she buys a cheap postcard  
writes a note on the back.  
Something witty and benign.  
Goes to a mall and puts it on a table  
in the foodcourt.  
Peeks from around a corner to watch  
the interactions with her note.  
Watches people read her note  
her mind.  
Watches them pick up the postcard  
touch it, smell it.  
When someone rips it up or steals it  
she makes a new one,  
new message.  
People are noticing her  
for the first time  
in a long time,  
and they don't even realize it.

And she writes on one postcard  
"Maybe one day you'll understand  
how painful it is for the person you love  
to love someone else.  
I hope you never do."  
Only she can't seem to put that one on a table.  
Can't bare the thought  
of ketchup staining it

some 13 yr. old stealing it.

She brings it home to her apartment

tapes it to her window.

Beyond her words is a hospital.

Her window directly lines up with a hospital window.

Through the block between she sees many things.

Sees how people come and go. Death.

Last moments.

Joy, recovery. Sons forgiving fathers,

fathers being forgotten.

Sons being born

and yet never her own.

Always she is looking in,

always the darkness making the light

crisper, brighter.

]

### **Father**

They tell me  
every little girl is searching for her father.  
Searching the streets  
the libraries,  
parties and informal dinners,  
today the internet and the singles mingles.  
And when we find our father,  
in whatever shape, size, or form,  
we marry him.  
We marry him  
(the same man, really,  
that raised us)  
and we raise little boys just like him  
that are a perfect match somewhere  
for some girl,  
and little girls who will look for him, too,  
look for this perfect match  
this carbon-copy.  
And the pain of this search,  
of coming close  
but then finding that  
this one is too argumentative  
this one's sense of humor is the slightest bit off.  
The pain of constantly searching

the fear  
that we will fail to find our fathers.

Only I'm searching for my actual father.  
Trying to find him  
to know him  
to know something of myself  
through his story and life.  
Trying, desperately, to make sense of the pieces.  
But my story is not a tragic one.  
My father and I weren't separated at birth  
he didn't walk out when I was 6.  
My father has always been here  
always been in my life.  
Attended all of my concerts, my graduations.  
Always tucked me in,  
gave me a kiss goodnight.  
Over the weekends he took me hiking  
to Mets games  
to the movies.  
We've talked about math  
(which he taught at the secondary level for 16 or so years),  
philosophy  
(which he's studied independently for the last 40),  
anything and everything,  
sometimes nothing at all just talking and joking,  
and talking about people who talk for too long,  
or people who have forgotten the joy of talking,  
or the joy of talking about nothing;  
the joy of just being with another person  
that we find in each other

that I wonder if he found  
and still does find  
with my mother  
as I do.  
Talking and enjoying and learning,  
but still with the undercurrent,  
for me, of fear.

The fact remains that,  
more than anything  
I fear not knowing my father.  
I fear that he will leave this Earth  
before I have heard all of his stories  
before I know what he thought  
when he first saw my mother  
what he thinks she first thought when she saw him:  
the nervousness and anticipation  
that we children forget  
our parents are capable of claiming as their own,  
and what it was like to grow up when he did,  
grow up as he did with a postman for a father  
and a secretary for a mother—  
a mother who knew not how to drive  
or be independent,  
and would later fall apart so badly  
only a mental institution could save her  
as her husband  
(no doubt a carbon copy of her own father)  
left her alone,  
surrounded by distant strangers  
of children and grandchildren.

And I fear all this  
while my own father is two states from me  
two rooms from me  
two feet from me.

## **David Hockney**

I.

David Hockney's exhibit opened  
a couple weeks before I turned 22.  
When I tell my class that I'd like to go  
on the class trip, already scheduled  
on my birthday,  
they look at me as if I have odd priorities.  
Spend a birthday at a museum?  
Spend a birthday looking at art?  
Absolutely. After I finish my birthday tradition, I'll be there.

We get to the exhibit at some ungodly hour  
and immediately break apart,  
some attracted by color, some by size or style.  
I can't tell if I'm moving faster  
or slower, much slower, than the rest of my group,  
and for a minute it bothers me.  
Then I get caught up in the wildness  
that is Hockney's work in portraits.

Hockney works in many media—  
paint, tapestry, drawing, photography.  
If there exists a medium,  
he's used it, tried it.

Most of the people in his portraits are friends,  
people Hockey admired, or worked with.  
A couple of people appear more than once,  
and a further couple, still, appear in all media.  
His mother and his long-time friend, Celia,  
to be specific.  
He paints his mother like a momma's boy would  
an old wooden woman,  
fragile and creaking and cracking at night.  
By the end of the exhibit  
her eyes are the only wet part left,  
dripping intensely with age,  
ruin.  
They are the colors of mood rings.  
Celia is somehow sexual in all forms 2D  
and I question if Hockey is really gay,  
or if something maybe happened  
maybe sometime in the past  
between them.  
I find myself angry at Hockney  
for painting Celia in suggestive positions,  
laced up in lingerie with hair all tussled.  
Did her husband get jealous  
or did he not know, at all,  
until he saw these portraits?  
I wonder and I wonder, but the provided information doesn't say,  
and as much as I can infer from these portraits  
I am left  
unsatisfied.  
  
After the exhibit we go to the cafeteria.



All these years of going to the MFA  
didn't know of it. A basement.  
I make myself a salad,  
which no one comments on.  
And then I get myself a slice of cake  
which gets comments  
between the bites and mms from parfaits.  
I feel the Homer painting calling me,  
it can't be far away from where we both sit.  
I feel the waves swell and grow  
waiting for me to look at them,  
waiting for someone to notice, anyone to notice,  
but especially me  
on my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday.  
I hear the man in the painting saying my name.  
It sounds like a plea and it's beautiful  
in its quieted desperation.  
And just when I think I can take the separation no longer  
I am offered a ride home.  
Do I stay to visit the painting I've loved so long,  
and then be stranded, alone, on an overcast day,  
or do I take the ride home and feel incomplete?  
I take the ride. Stupid girl.

As we walk to the car I feel awful,  
sick. Maybe the salad, maybe the cake slice,  
the abandonment of beauty.  
The car is very far, almost a quarter of the way home  
and I want to turn back  
or at least make some last attempt at making peace  
with my unsettled self.

Take some pictures of the marsh on our left,  
something, anything.

Trips to the museum shouldn't be so short  
so lackluster.

I want to feel museumy, museumed.

It's the first time I've gone without visiting  
my painting. And on my birthday, too.

## II.

On the car ride home, sitting in the passenger seat,  
my parents call me on my cell phone.

"Happy Birthday, Jess!

Happy, Happy Birthday dear Jess!"

Want to thank my parents for calling me.

Want to thank my parents for being amazing people  
to each other, and to me.

Wonder if the other people in the car can hear what they've said.

Wonder if they care, what they think of me now.

I tell my parents that I'm in a car, can I call them back?

I feel guilty, hang up.

Look at the front windshield, a big pane of glass  
covered in scratches and stains

little windshield wiper residue markings.

Through it I watch as we get in the wrong lane,  
make the wrong turn, go the wrong way.

This woman has no idea where she is.

Ignore and I see my reflection in the glass  
the bottom half of my body.

My lap and in it my bag.

Think about all that's inside my bag,  
really how little, but still important.

I think of my mother's 40 pound purse  
an ark of a purse, an ocean.  
The entire world's convenience at her shoulder.  
Money, sunglasses, chapstick whenever you need it.  
I put on Cherry flavored Vaseline lip gloss  
and get out of the car.

The moat around the Chapel is full,  
like someone collected all the dew that fell on Boston this morning  
and poured it in with a funnel.  
I debate stepping on to the ledge for my usual balance beam act  
but think that most wet birthdays  
aren't good birthdays.  
With a moment to think,  
I realize that last time it was my fancy dress  
and the time before my headphones.  
The time before that I was on my way to dinner.  
Reason after reason.  
It suddenly dawns on me—  
there is always a reason not to,  
always a reason to postpone.  
So I step up and balance as best I can,  
breathing in the morning and the dew,  
Hockey and his subjects,  
the car and my parents, the giftshop the cafeteria the cake.  
Up now, I step, fast, forward.

## Epilogue

### *for my father*

A young man walks alongside an older man. They are by a stream, small and struggling. The young man grew up near the stream, and thinks about how quickly the water flowed when he was younger. As he grew he noticed new things—the wear on the stone bridge, the evidence of others visiting the stream, opened acorn cases. It all seems much smaller, much sadder now.

The older man is teaching him, telling him. He says, “You asked me about Maya. I never got to tell you. I would like to, now.” And as he says this, the young man winces with the pain of sharp light unexpectedly hitting his eye. He looks up, trying to find where it came from, but sees nothing. And then he hears a sound, distant and warbling, almost. He walks to it. As it gets louder, it becomes beautiful. And in front of him is now a girl. Her hair is dark, and thick. Long, it sweeps the water’s surface, pulling up the water slightly, to meet it.

He catches his own reflection in the water, diamonds pushing into him, drawing him out in pieces. She looks up, still singing—quieter now, a melody without words. She is washing a metal plate, shiny and silky in the wetness of the stream. Its dents and bumps scatter brightness where the sun would not otherwise reach. There is a hill of plates and cups beside her, piled on a dark red cloth. He slowly lowers himself to the ground, his knees pressing into the Earth. Helping her wash, listening to her sing, neither says a word. He washes the pieces quickly, but dries them with great care on the corners of his clothing. Each plate, each cup soaks the cloth of his clothing as the metal dulls and dims. He puts them down; they clash together, under the sound of her song.

Just as simply as he crouched to help her clean, he gathers the pieces together, slings them over his shoulder inside the cloth, and helps her up. They walk into the woods, branches cracking and breaking underneath the sound of her song. As the woods get denser the sounds become louder and she is soon drowned out by the crunch of leaves, the calls of animals, the sounds of life untouched by

man. When they finally reach the end of the woods he finds that her hand is in his, and she is leading the way.

She leads him to her home, a small wooden and stone building in the clearing. There is a fire going inside, and he is overcome by the warmth, the smell of roses. Her singing seems to touch everything in the house—the wisps of fire, the air it breathes, books, wooden chairs, uneven floors, the gracefully arced ceiling. He breathes in deeply as she comes up from behind him, and places a warm metal cup into his hand, which already is outstretched, unknowingly waiting. He breathes in to the bottom of his lungs; it smells of mint, deep but smooth. As he drinks it, his throat is coated and his stomach soothed. They sit together and drink, she hums into her cup.

As the sun begins to set, and the fire provides the only light, she looks at him and stops singing. “Please stay,” she says while looking into his eyes. They are the first words from her mouth to his ears. It is half request, and half command. He nods, and she continues singing. It is black out by the time the fire dies. He hears the cicadas through the wood and stone of her house. They walk outside, look up. He moves behind her and closes his arms around her. Her head falls back onto his shoulder, and as she stops singing, he begins. They see no shooting star, no asteroid, no meteor, but the night is just as beautiful. They sleep on the ground, hand in hand, breathing with the trees and the stars.

His ears wake up before his eyes do. He hears her song, still a tune without words, familiar but never the same. It fills him with a sense of belonging. As his eyes open he is struck by the lushness of the scene—how green the thick blades of grass are, how white the sheets are that she is hanging from the trees. There are enough to make a wall around the house. It reminds him of a wedding or a funeral or a ceremony that comes from the earliest civilization he ever learned about.

Easily finding his way around the kitchen, he makes breakfast for them. Hours pass and she picks vegetables from the garden, makes lunch. The sun sets and they make dinner. And losing track of the days, a weekend turns into a week, a

week into a month, and a month into a year. Her song has become his song, and the few seconds he cannot hear it, the world seems silent, unreal.

They travel to foreign countries, experience cities and chaos, nightlife and tourism. They visit family members and share holidays and celebrations, sadness and remorse. They feel complete with each other, and then they feel complete with their children. Their house buzzes with youth—giggles, cries, toys crashing and falling. Smiling, singing, loving—they hold hands throughout their children's childhoods.

Then their house buzzes with teenage defiance, disaffection. They laugh more, smile more, love more. The stars shine brighter, the trees sway deeper, darker. And as their children move away, move to their own adulthoods, they watch with deep understanding. It feels so personal, so eternal. It feels as if no one else could ever feel as much. And with this understanding, mixed with pride and joy, their wrinkles spread. Spread around their mouths, from years of smiling and singing, around their eyes, from years of seeing, around their hands and hearts, ears and feet. The wrinkles spread, welcomed, until one day she disappears inside of them. Until he wakes up one morning and cannot hear her singing.

He sits in the silence, in his disbelief, waiting for her song to continue. He waits as the moon rises, as the sun sets, as the moon sets, as the sun rises. He eats nothing, drinks nothing, speaks nothing, sings nothing—only sits, and waits. And when he thinks he can take no more, he carries her body outside, his old one folding in under her weight. Setting her down onto the cold Earth, carefully, he recalls her words of instruction, and he builds the structure, and then the fire.

He puts her ashes in one of their metal cups and places it by their bed. He smells her on her pillow, feels her body's impression on their mattress. As he drifts to sleep, tears drying against his skin, he plans the next day—imagining himself pouring her ashes into the stream where they met, sending her away, across the country. Into the oceans, around the world. Sending a piece of her everywhere, to

everyone. Letting her grow into flowers and trees, letting people everywhere breathe her in and out. He thinks this as sleep overcomes him.

He wakes in what felt like one second later. He can still feel the dense lushness around their house, hear the last clicking of the cicadas. Cane in hand, he makes his way into the woods, retracing his steps those many years ago. Sooner than he thinks possible he reaches the river. It rushes, it overflows, but he knows it is the one—feels it is the one. He slowly lowers himself to the ground, his old knees pressing into the Earth, hurting him. His hands shaking, he lets her ashes fall to the stream as he sings to her. Somehow recalling the very tune she sang when he first approached her, his voice eerily the same, he gives her the most beautiful goodbye he can. Straining to see farther, catch one last glimpse of her, his eyes follow her until his head aches from the strain. Sensing finality, he stands. And as he turns around, he sees the old man. Without waiting for a prompt, the old man inhales, exhales, and says, “You asked me about Maya. Now you know.”

And as my father finishes telling me this story, 21 years worth of tears pour out of my eyes. “Uh oh,” he says, and I strain to tell him that these are not bad tears, but I cannot get out the words—my throat is choked with emotion, but even if it weren’t, I wouldn’t be sure what to say. Although this is the first time I’ve heard the story, I already knew the ending, and I feel that I’ve known it for quite some time now. I think about how many times, and in how many ways the story has been told and heard. Crying is all I can do. It is the only way I know of, the only thing I feel I can do, to show him that I understand.